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ABSTRACT

Purposes of this study were to assess: (1) the manner in which parents modify their choice of discipline when dealing with continuing child noncompliance; (2) the relation of family risk for delinquent behavior to parental intensity of discipline with adolescents and their younger siblings; and (3) parental ratings of intensity of discipline in four disciplinary situations. A total of 29 mother-adolescent-sibling triads from father-absent families participated in the study. In 13 of the families, the adolescent had a history of delinquent behavior. Assessment was conducted in the family home by trained interviewers. Mothers rated both children on the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist and on a modified version of the Intensity of Parental Punishment Scale. Each mother indicated how she would respond to the first, second, and third occurrences of each of 33 misbehaviors. Results showed that mothers in both high- and low-risk families responded to noncompliance at hypothetically different times with increasingly intense discipline. Moreover, this pattern was evident in each of the discipline situations: misbehavior in school, crying, cruelty to children and animals, and misbehavior in public. Mothers in low-risk families chose higher intensities of discipline for the younger siblings in school-related situations than did mothers in high-risk families. (RH)

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Intensity and Sequence of Parental Discipline in High-Risk Families

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Intensity and Sequence of Parental Discipline in High-Risk Families

One of the most challenging and important responsibilities facing parents involves the control of children's inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors. The parents' selection and application of a given set of disciplinary strategies can have important ramifications for their children's psychosocial development. Thus, the factors which influence parental choice of discipline, and the manner in which parents effectively implement and modify their disciplinary strategies, would seem to represent important variables to identify. The identification of such variables could have important implications for the design of interventions with families at high risk for antisocial behavior.

This study was designed to address three issues. First, most previous researchers have assessed parental disciplinary strategies at one point in time. However, as Bell (1977) first suggested, and as others (e.g., Mulhern & Passman, 1981) have subsequently demonstrated in laboratory research, parents modify their disciplinary strategies in response to the specific behaviors of the child. A major purpose of the present study was to assess the manner in which parents modify their choice of discipline over time when dealing with continuing child noncompliance.

Second, most studies of parental disciplinary strategies have focused on well-adjusted children and parents (low-risk families). However, it seems especially important to know about parental disciplinary strategies in families of children with serious behavior problems, such as antisocial behavior (high-risk families). A second purpose of this study was to assess the relation of family risk for delinquent behavior to parental intensity of

discipline with adolescents and their younger siblings. This was addressed by including families of delinquent and well-adjusted families.

Third, many researchers of child discipline have assessed discipline in global terms or with respect to only a few common child misbehaviors. However, Grusec and Kuczynski (1980) found that different disciplinary situations yielded different disciplinary responses from parents. Therefore, a third purpose of this study was to assess parental ratings of intensity of discipline in different disciplinary situations.

Method

Twenty-nine mother-adolescent-sibling triads from father-absent families participated in the study. In 13 of the families, the adolescent had a history of delinquent behavior; in the remaining 16 families, the adolescent had no history of psychiatric or legal difficulties. The families in the two groups did not differ significantly on a number of relevant demographic variables. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all subjects prior to the experimental session.

The assessment was conducted in the family's home by trained interviewers. Each family member was given the Vocabulary subtest of the WISC-R (Wechsler, 1974) or the WAIS-R (Wechsler, 1981). Next, the mother completed a demographic questionnaire. Then, the mother rated both children on the Revised Behavior Problem Checklist (RBPC; Quay & Peterson, 1983) and on a modified version of the Intensity of Parental Punishment Scale (IPPS; Gordon, Jones, & Nowicki, 1979). The IPPS consists of 33 short descriptions of child misbehaviors. Each mother was asked to indicate on a 7-point intensity of punishment scale how she would handle the initial occurrence of each behavior. Next, she indicated the response she would choose if the

behavior happened a second time within two weeks of the initial transgression, and if the behavior occurred a third time within a month.

Results and Discussion

Three 2 (family risk status) x 3 (time) multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were performed on the mothers' intensity of discipline ratings in the following situations: misbehavior in school, crying, cruelty to children and animals, and misbehavior in public. This analysis was run separately for (a) the younger siblings, (b) the adolescents, and (c) the two children together. When appropriate, univariate analyses of variance and post-hoc tests were used to evaluate the nature of significant effects.

The multivariate analyses revealed a significant effect for time in each of the four situations for younger siblings, $F(8, 90) = 31.05$, $p<.0001$; for adolescents, $F(8, 90) = 21.36$, $p<.0001$; and for overall family discipline, $F(8, 82) = 47.63$, $p<.0001$. These results showed that mothers in both high- and low-risk families responded to noncompliance at hypothetically different times with increasingly intense discipline. Moreover, this pattern was evident in each of the four discipline situations. These results are consistent with analogue research (e.g., Mulhern & Passman, 1981), and provide support for Bell's suggestion that parental behaviors are organized in hierarchical and sequential response repertoires. Such results are also consistent with Bell's view that socialization involves reciprocal effects between parent and child. Although previous researchers have suggested that power assertive parental discipline leads to child aggression, resistance to authority, and power-assertion with peers (e.g., Becker, 1964), the results of the current study suggest that such child misbehavior might also elicit

increasingly intense parental punishment. Undoubtedly, both the parent and child influence and gradually change each other's behavior over time.

The multivariate analysis for younger siblings revealed a significant main effect for family risk status, $F(4, 21) = 3.01$, $p<.04$. These results indicated that mothers in low-risk families chose higher intensities of discipline for the younger siblings in school-related situations than did mothers in high-risk families. Perhaps mothers of delinquent adolescents develop a "cognitive set" based on their experiences with the adolescent's behavior (e.g., aggression, associations with delinquent peers, attention problems). When viewed within the context of a cognitive set, some misbehaviors exhibited by siblings in high-risk families could be less salient to their mothers than would be the same behaviors of siblings in low-risk families. Given the same misbehavior, the siblings of delinquent adolescents could appear to be relatively well behaved in comparison with the adolescents, while in contrast, the siblings of well-adjusted adolescents could seem to be engaging in very undesirable behavior. Thus, the siblings of well-adjusted adolescents could receive more discipline for the same behavior than would the siblings of delinquent adolescents.

This school-related disciplinary difference could potentially have long-term effects on the child's psychosocial development. Academic growth and socialization are two important developmental processes that take place within the school setting. Continued misbehavior in school could result in the child's progress falling behind that of his or her peers, and failure to effectively curb such misbehaver could set the child up for future academic failure. Perhaps parents who choose less intense discipline for school misbehavior also implicitly place less value on academic achievement, school

behavior, and respect for authority. Such negative values toward school, coupled with poor academic progress, could adversely influence peers' attitudes toward the child. Ultimately, the child might be more likely to associate with other low-achieving peers who, in turn, could be more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Indeed, Klein et al. (1977) reported that 40% of the siblings of delinquent adolescents in a no-treatment control group were subsequently referred for delinquent behavior. Thus, parent-training may be a very important intervention for younger siblings of delinquent adolescents, but one that must be carried out when the children are quite young. Such interventions would be especially important as a means of preventing future sibling delinquency in high-risk families.

It seems surprising that no significant differences between maternal discipline ratings for high- and low-risk adolescent misbehavior were found; mothers in both high- and low-risk families chose increasingly intense discipline over time in each of the four discipline situations. One possible explanation for this finding is that although the vignettes were rated by the mothers as more typical of delinquent adolescents than well-adjusted adolescents, the situations were relatively atypical for both. Perhaps situations that were more representative of the adolescent behavior the mothers were used to handling would have yielded different results. For example, if asked about the adolescents' peer relations, the mothers in the two groups may have chosen significantly different intensities or sequences of discipline.

Another possible reason for the similar pattern of discipline chosen by the mothers of adolescents in each group is that factors other than parental intensity of discipline are related to delinquency. Perhaps factors such as

support from deviant peers (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985; Hanson, Henggeler, Haefele, & Rodick, 1984), family conflict (Borduin & Henggeler, 1987), or adolescent moral development (Jurkovic & Prentice, 1977) are more strongly related to delinquency than are intensity of discipline and the sequencing of that discipline. Indeed, one of the main ways that the delinquent and well-adjusted adolescents differed was on socialized aggression (i.e., loyalty and bonding to deviant peers).

There are limitations that must be considered when evaluating the present results. First, all of the data on discipline were obtained through maternal report, and the likelihood that the mothers would have behaved as they had indicated is unknown. It is possible that the mothers responded in a socially desirable manner. However, Gordon et al. (1979) found that IPPS scores were not related to scores on the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale. Nevertheless, the assessment of parental discipline over time from the child's perspective could yield important information about parental consistency of discipline, and provide an important validity check for parental responses.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the situations presented to the mothers may not have been typical of the misbehaviors of these adolescents. More common situations may have yielded different results.

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